SHIFTING CONCEPTIONS OF THE DIVINE: SARAPIS AS PART OF PTOLEMAIC EGYPT’S SOCIAL IMAGINARIES

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The concept of social imaginary was introduced in the field of social sciences by Cornelius Castoriadis in his seminal work *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1975). According to Castoriadis, each society institutes itself upon specific structures (laws, values, symbols, narratives, etc.) which are primarily imaginary. The institution of society is self-institution and its consciousness of this process, of instituting itself, touches upon the concept of autonomy. For Castoriadis, autonomous societies are open and subject to alteration; they perennially challenge their structures, pose questions about their existence and modify their systems of significations. In contrast, heteronomous societies are closed-up and conservative; they are static and they express a remarkable resistance to change. Religion, an institution of both ancient and modern societies, is a feature of heteronomy according to Castoriadis. First, he views religion as a conformable and corrosive action regarding social imaginary significations, since ‘everything that is becomes subsumable under the same significations’.

Societies institute themselves through the constant establishment of their representations. Religion appears as a factor which poses a threat to this process, since it provides a set of answers, formulated for instance as a system of beliefs, which is solid and determined, canonized and unsusceptible to inquiry. In this sense, religion amputates, if not abolishes, what Castoriadis calls ‘radical imaginary’, the human capacity to create and represent, since religion provides fixed and rigid responses to ‘the demand for signification’, a principle that is fundamental for a society’s self-institution. Second, religion propounds false dichotomies between ‘real’ and ‘transcendental’, ‘worldly’ and ‘divine’, ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’. This antithetic schema undermines society’s ability to comprehend that it is itself the formative agent of its institutions, as well as its ability to realise that the creational power of each society is the society itself.

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1 Castoriadis 1997, 317.
Despite the negative critique, Castoriadis’ theory considers religion to be a fundamental factor for the construction of a society’s imaginary; it recognizes that religion can have a formative effect on a given society. Religion is shaped by the social imaginary, but it also shapes it. It constitutes a tool which elucidates the manifold ways with which a society signifies and represents itself.

Consequently, the conception of religion as part of a society’s social imaginary requires the study of religion not as an autonomous discourse, demanding specific methodological tools in order to be approached and analyzed, but as an expression of human culture, subject to social, economic and political interference and considerations. In this sense, religion is not an obscure or abstract essence separate from the other multifarious expressions of human activity; as such, it is understood and studied via the categories of ‘sacred’, ‘holy’ or ‘mystery’. Even expressions which are classified under the heading of personal religiosity are inextricably connected with the cultural and social, that is, the historical context. The perception and representation of the divine by an individual (manifested, for instance, by his or her choice of the linguistic structure for a dedication or by the material and decoration of an offering) are dependent upon and constitute an expression of the ways regarded by the society in which he or she is living as approved and acceptable for addressing whatever is, in each instance, defined as supernatural. This conception seems especially valid in polytheistic societies (here it should be noted that Castoriadis does not seem to have polytheism in mind in his negative critique of religion as a constructive agent of social imaginary; on the contrary, his examples are drawn from the three major monotheisms of the 20th century). In these societies, the idea of the divine is not usually regulated by specific dogmas formulated as strict, inescapable laws, and the concept of god is more fluent and changeable. However, a certain religious coherence can be detected in specific cultural and social frameworks as articulated, for example, in the inscriptive modes and traditions which evolved in particular localities.

The application of the concept of social imaginary to the study of Hellenistic religion\(^2\) demands a shift in methodological focus. If the object of inquiry is the signification of the divine in a particular society, then a more holistic approach is required to study what we perceive as religious phenom-

\(^2\) By religion, in this framework, I mean a system of beliefs and practices with regard to the supernatural realized by individuals or communities, in specific geographical and chronological conditions; it encompasses different cults, rituals, myths, images, etc.